

## Book Review

### **The Top of the Top End: John Gilbert's Manuscript Notes for John Gould on Vertebrates from Port Essington and Cobourg Peninsula (Northern Territory, Australia): with Comments on Specimens Collected during the Settlement Period 1838 to 1849, and Subsequently**

By Clemency Fisher and John Calaby. *The Beagle, Records of the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory*. Supplement 4. Museum and Art Gallery Northern Territory, Darwin, Australia & World Museum, Liverpool, UK. 2009; iv + 240 pp; paperback. ISSN 1833-7511. Price A\$66.00.

This latest supplement of *The Beagle* is a marvellous publication for anyone interested in the history of the discovery of Australia's flora and fauna. It is a meticulously researched, highly readable and beautifully illustrated work.

The book commences with a Preface by David Attenborough in which he reminisces about his time in Kakadu National Park and his meeting with the late John Calaby, an "unpretentious and modest" man and "one of the outstanding Australian taxonomists of his era and a particular expert on its mammals". Following the Abstract the 28-page Introduction tells us that the aim of the work was to draw together information about existing vertebrate specimens from Port Essington and the Cobourg Peninsula, with particular emphasis on the collections and manuscripts pertaining to John Gilbert. The other specimens referred to include those gathered by collectors during the time Port Essington was occupied from 1838 to 1849, by the CSIRO expeditions between 1965 and 1968 – the results of which were published in Frith and Calaby (1974), and by a few other individual researchers.

Much of the Introduction is dedicated to a short history of Victoria, the Port Essington settlement, and gives an outline of the various collectors of objects of natural history, with Gilbert a stand-out contributor. To quote from the book "Gilbert's Port Essington specimens alone represent about fifty new species or subspecies of birds and animals ... Gilbert also collected many other new forms on the Cobourg Peninsula, particularly fish ..., reptiles, molluscs ..., and insects ..." It isn't actually stated, but I believe the wording is meant to imply that Gilbert collected the type specimens of these taxa.

Much credit is also given to John MacGillivray (aboard *H.M.S. Fly* and *H.M.S. Rattlesnake*); others of importance include John Lort Stokes (*H.M.S. Beagle*), Benjamin Bynoe (*H.M.S. Beagle* and later *H.M.S. Fly*), Captain William Chambers and Assistant Surgeon Sibbald of the colony's ship, *Pelorus*, and Joseph Beete Jukes and John Ince (both *H.M.S. Fly*). I have a minor criticism here in that the major botanical collector from Port Essington, John Armstrong, is not mentioned among the natural history

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collectors. Armstrong, the settlement's gardener, collected hundreds of specimens, about 30 of which are types. His contribution to the early knowledge of biodiversity in the Port Essington region is probably second only to that of Gilbert.

The Introduction also includes a reproduction of Gilbert's letter to John Gould dated 19<sup>th</sup> September 1840. Among other things he noted how the heat and humidity "brings on such a degree of lassitude [sic] and weakness, that I have now adopted the plan of going out by the dawn of day, and the cool of the evening" to collect. The renowned scientist Thomas Huxley, aboard *H.M.S. Rattlesnake*, expressed similar views of the climate to those of Gilbert, noting that "Port Essington is *worse than a ship*, and it is no small comfort to know that this is possible." (Huxley 1935).

The introductory chapter concludes with a list of acronyms for museums and libraries holding specimens and manuscripts relating to natural history collecting at Port Essington; there are 30 such acronyms, a figure reflecting just how big a task it was to bring this monograph to fruition. Indeed, it is noted on p. 211 that it "is the result of intensive ferreting done over the last 25 years in order to locate and analyse [Gilbert's] specimens". It was common for specimens from the antipodes – and elsewhere – to have been widely dispersed to interested parties in Europe, both before and subsequent to their formal naming. In part, Gilbert's specimens may be more scattered than most due to the entrepreneurial nature of Gould, but the sale of Gould's primary collection of Australian birds on which the descriptions of many of his new species were based very much added to the difficulty. Gould had offered his primary collection to the British Museum for the sum of £1,000 but it was turned down and, with Gould apparently outraged and determined to humiliate the trustees (Tree 1991), the collection subsequently came to rest in what is now the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia (ANSP). The collection was sent to the USA via Paris where taxidermists mounted all the specimens but, in so doing, stripped many of them of their original labels. This, unsurprisingly, "caused endless problems with identifying Gould's bird types, or establishing the data for other important individuals."

The bulk of the monograph lists vertebrate species collected from Port Essington. It is arranged in four parts. Part 1 deals with nearly 40 species of fish, of which five are illustrated, including colour photographs of four holotype specimens collected by Gilbert. Part 2 opens with a transcript of a two-page manuscript account by Gilbert entitled "Reptiles of Port Essington", that consists solely of an account of the Frilled Lizard. Thirteen frogs, one crocodile, six turtles, 26 lizards and 32 snakes are listed in this section. Part 3 covers 28 species of mammals and opens with a transcript of Gilbert's manuscript "Quadrupeds of Port Essington", while a copy of the handwritten manuscript is provided in Appendix 1. Part 4 deals with birds, more than 200 of them. As with the other lists, it is one in which to dabble to find information about the Port Essington naturalists and their collections, and Gilbert's observations of birds. It ends with assorted tables, including one listing bird species recorded for the Cobourg Peninsula against the collector; another lists avian scientific names based on type specimens collected from Port Essington.

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In all four parts the meticulous recording of specimen data and associated references is highly impressive. Importantly, the layout is such that it is easy for anyone to scan the text for collectors of interest. Until such time as all herbaria and museums electronically catalogue their specimens *and* make them readily available, publications such as this are important to taxonomists and historians of natural history.

The book concludes with a long list of references and several appendices, including one containing “John MacGillivray’s species list from *H.M.S. Fly*, largely from Port Essington, dated May 1845”, and an index of species names, scientific and common.

This work abounds with illustrations, there being 145 figures in total. Almost all are in colour and of these 60 are of museum specimens, many of which are types. Figures are frequently accompanied by notes, often including information additional and complementary to that in the main text. Included amongst the figures are ten full-page illustrations of paintings taken from Jardine & Selby’s *Illustrations of Ornithology* (1830), Gould’s *The Mammals of Australia* (1845-1863) and Gould’s *The Birds of Australia* (1840-1848). These include plates from Gould’s ornithological work depicting both black-headed and red-headed forms of the Gouldian Finch.

The science of systematics produces many publications in the form of taxonomic revisions and monographs which list the specimens examined and, as such, these publications are a valuable resource to historians and natural historians, not just professional taxonomists. Sadly, I have little doubt that these publications are rarely examined by historians because the works are seldom well-publicised, readily available or easily understood by those without a scientific background. However, this book is exceptional in that it is not only accessible but the information it contains should be understood by all who read it. I urge anyone with an interest in northern Australian natural history and the history of collectors and collections to delve into this well-produced work. Clemency Fisher, the late John Calaby and a succession of editors of *The Beagle* (Helen Larson, Dirk Megirian, Chris Glasby and Richard Willan) have produced a most valuable reference which is deserving of a wide audience.

## References

- Frith H.J. and Calaby J.H. (1974) *Fanna Survey of the Port Essington District, Cobourg Peninsula, Northern Territory of Australia*. CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research, Technical Paper No. 28.
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